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The Preacher and the Pump

Robert Harvey*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

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THE Rev. Josiah Skinner knelt on his red Turkey rug and peered stealthily out of his parlor window. He started suddenly, and his voice boomed out in anguish, rattling the ornaments on the corner whatnot.

"Oh Lord," he roared, "Oh Lord, she's taking off the pump handle. She's taking it right off." His round red face glared upward accusingly. "She's got no right to do that, Lord. You know as well as I do that it's my pump."

He glared upward a moment longer, then heaved himself to his feet and began pacing heavily back and forth.

What a fool thing to do, he thought bitterly. You'd think that woman would have some sense, her being a widow and all, but here she was, acting like a silly school girl. Just because he'd made a little mistake at that box social. Not like he'd done anything on purpose.

He stopped pacing and looked upward again. "Oh Lord," he called sternly. "Oh Lord." He waited until sure he was being listened to, then continued, "Last week Hannah Johnson chained down the pump handle so thy servant couldn't even pump a pail of water without sawing through the chain. Now she's taking the handle clear off."

His voice became more aggrieved. "Is that any way to treat thy servant, Lord? Pound some sense into that widow's head, Lord, and do it now. Amen." He sat down on the horse-hair sofa, feeling better now that God had been reminded of his responsibilities.

I won't use the town pump, he thought stoutly. She can't make me do that. Wouldn't be dignified for a man of God to use a common pump like that. I'll get a pump handle of my own first, that's what I'll do. That'll show Hannah no red-haired widow can get ahead of me.

Josiah absently smoothed his trousers, his fingers passing over the small neat patch in the right knee. The patch reminded him of Sarah, his second wife.

"You shouldn't have taken her, Lord," he said reproachfully. "She was a good woman even if she did snore."

Fine way to treat a man, he thought. Here he had to live alone, no one to cook or take care of him, Hannah fussing around all the time instead of showing some common sense and marrying him like she should. He snorted indignantly.

Hannah'd make a good wife, even if she was a little headstrong. Fine God-fearing woman. Good cook, too. And substantial. Let's see, was it three or four farms her husband left her? A fine upstanding substantial woman.

He saw Ed Simmond's lanky figure slouching past the window and hurried to the porch to call after him. Ed turned, a little reluctantly, Josiah thought, and came into the house.

He stood just inside the door, awkwardly turning his hat in his hands. "Howdy, parson. I was just coming to see you."

"You looked it through the window," Rev. Skinner said dryly. He began drumming his fingers on the table. After a moment he said, "Notice the pump as you came in?"

"Why, yes," Ed said uneasily. "Seems as if I did now that you mention it. Handle get broke, did it?"

"You know what happened to the handle as well as I do. Hannah took it." He drummed harder on the table. "Anything to keep me from using that pump."

"Hannah's a mighty determined woman," Ed agreed.

"When I talked to you last week you said you'd do something. Why haven't you?"

"Well now, I was figuring. . . "

"Figuring nothing. You're our town marshal, aren't you?"

Ed nodded weakly.

"And you're the justice of the peace, aren't you?"

Ed sighed hopelessly.

"And," continued Rev. relentlessly, "you're the mayor, aren't you?" Ed nodded again.

"Well then, do something. Use your authority. What kind of a church member are you to let your minister die of thirst?" He glared at Ed, while trying to look as thirsty as possible.

Ed cleared his throat. "I had a talk with Hannnah yesterday."

"She's ready to forget all this foolishness?" Josiah asked eagerly.

"Not so you'd notice. She's still riled about that social.

Claims you took her, then bought Stella Jackson's box. Pretty put out about it. Says if you feel that way, you can't use her pump."

"Oh now Ed, you know as well as I do that was a mistake." Josiah flushed. "How'd I know they'd both tie their boxes with red ribbon?" He flared up again. "Anyway it's my pump, not hers. Just because I've let her use it.."

Ed shrugged his shoulders. "You know it's a mistake and I know it's a mistake, but Hannah don't. And you know Hannah when she makes her mind up about something." He stopped as if there was nothing more to be said, and started toward the door.

"Now Ed, Josiah pleaded, moving between him and the door. "Don't make it sound so final like that." He paused to let a new idea take shape in his mind, then started talking persuasively.

"It's not for myself I'm asking you to help, Ed. It's for the church. It doesn't look good for a widower and a widow to be living next door to each other like this. People might talk."

He held up a hand to keep Ed from interrupting. "I know Ed, I know. You wouldn't think anything wrong, and neither would any other good Baptist. But you know how these Methodists are. They'll talk about anything. And they're feeling awful uppity anyway since they made more money at their last bake sale than we did."

Ed frowned in concern. "You're right. I hadn't thought of it that way before. But what can I do?"

Rev. Skinner wiped his forehead. That had been close.

"Well, Ed, the simplest thing would be to get her willing to marry me. You know she wants to, only she's too stubborn to admit it."

"That'd fix things fine, but what can I do?"

Josiah considered briefly, fingering his chin. "The way it is now she spends all her time trying to keep me from usng my own pump. If you were to run a boundary line and prove the pump is on my land, then she couldn't touch it. Might be willing to come to terms after she gets a little thirsty."

Ed shrugged. "Wouldn't hurt to try. I'll bring a surveyor over from Scottsville tomorrow."

"Fine, fine. I won't be around tomorrow though. Have a lot of country calls to make." He avoided looking at Ed. "So after the line's run you just tell Hannah she can't use the pump anymore. Then we'll see what happens."

He kept talking as he eased the protesting man out of the room and shut the door. Couldn't blame him for not wanting to face Hannah when she found out she couldn't use the pump. She'd probably calm down after a few days, though. A fine woman, a mighty fine woman. Let's see, was it three or four farms she had?

Ed was sitting on his porch waiting for him when he drove up the next afternoon. Ed didn't look happy.

"Well Ed, get her done?" he called out cheerily. "How'd she take it?" He drove into the barn and began to unharness. Ed followed him in, still silent.

"I said how'd it go, Ed?"

"Didn't take long. Got done in about an hour."

"Yes, but what about Hannah. What'd she say when she found out it wasn't her pump?"

Ed sidled toward the door. "Half of it's hers," he said over his shoulder. "Half of it's hers and half of it's yours." The line splits it in the middle." He stopped just outside the door and added, "She said you weren't to use any of the water from her half. Said she'd prosecute if you did."

Josiah sputtered for a moment, the words tumbling over each other and jamming in their effort to get out. Then he said, "Tell her the same thing. Do it right now. If I can't use it, neither can she."

"Figured that's what you'd say." Ed shook his head sadly and started toward Hannah's house.

Josiah threw the harness on the floor and glared up at the cobwebbed ceiling. "Oh Lord," he roared angrily. "Oh Lord, now look what's happened. You let the line run right through my pump, Lord. Is that any way to treat thy humble servant? You're supposed to be helping me, not that widow."

Josiah felt poorly in the morning. Here it was Saturday and tomorrow's sermon not yet planned. And he felt like he might be coming down with the gripe or worse. Why he could die right here in the house and no one would care. Nobody would even know until they missed him at church tomorrow.

He burned his hand cooking breakfast, and there was no water for his morning coffee. The stove kept smoking and the bacon burned. No getting around it, he had to get married, the sooner the better.

After breakfast he slicked back his remaining hair, put on his black Sunday coat, and walked across the yard to face Hannah.

Hannah was sitting on the back step shelling peas. She pointedly looked away as he came up, her shoulders stiff and uncompromising. Through the open kitchen window floated the smell of fresh bread, delicious and tantalizing.

"Morning, Hannah," he said mildly.

No answer. Her thick muscular arms moved steadily at her work.

"That bread smells mighty tempting, Hannah. You surely are a fine cook.' He beamed ingratiatingly.

She spoke without turning her head. "Don't reckon I'm much of a cook. Nobody buys my box at the socials."

"Now Hannah, you know that was all a mistake. You know I meant to buy your box." He wiped his forehead and restrained an urge to kick her.

She tossed her head, the red hair glinting in the sun. "Course I don't care," she said, her voice dripping self-pity. "Doesn't matter to me if you buy that skinny little Stella Jackson's box. Doesn't matter at all. Why should I mind just because all the neighbors are standing around laughing at me?" She began shelling peas again, her head bent.

Josiah glared at the back of her head. Why were women all such fools? Couldn't they understand when a man made an innocent mistake?

His voice sharpened in spite of himself. "I come to talk about the pump, Hannah. The way it is now neither of us can use it. Seems a shame to let a good well stand idle that way."

"The pump's mine. Half of it anyway. Should be able to do what I want with my own property."

The thought of all Hannah's property cut deep, though he tried not to show it. "Then you won't make up?"

"Don't see any cause to."

Josiah sighed deeply, waited to see if she'd noticed, then did it again just to make sure.

"Well, if that's the way you feel, Hannah. I won't bother you any more then." He sighed and shook his head sadly. "Guess Miss Jackson was right after all."

Hannah's head snapped around and she looked at him for the first time. "What about Stella Jackson? What was that old maid right about?"

"Why she said if you once made your mind up about something you wouldn't change it for anybody. Said I might just as well give up once you got your mind set against me."

"Seems she knows a lot about me."

"Seems to. Well, I'd better go get cleaned up."

"Why?" Her voice was suspicious. "What are you getting all spruced up for?"

"Miss Jackson was kind enough to ask me over for dinner today. Said she wanted to show me I had a few friends left." He smiled, as if in remembrance. "True friends, I think she said."

"Oh she did, did she. Still trying to get a man, and at her age too. She ought to be ashamed." Hannah faced him, hands on hips, her voice rising angrily. "Now you listen to me, Josiah. You're not going over there for dinner or anything else."

Josiah kept his face solemn. His voice became more plaintive. "But Hannah, I get hungry. It's hard on a man being a widower, living alone, no one to talk to, no decent food. . ."

"I know," she interrupted, her face softening a little. "I'm alone too, don't forget."

"Then you know how it is. And when someone is kind enough to invite me to dinner, give me a chance to eat good home-cooked food. . ."

"Good food! Not if she cooks it."

"Good home-cooked food," Josiah continued blandly, ignoring the interruption, "why then I'm only too happy to go."

"Call her a good cook! She can't even boil water without burning it." Hannah glared at him.

He smiled noncommittally and said nothing.

She paused to get her breath, then said abruptly, "You're coming here for dinner if you go anywhere. You'd starve on Stella Jackson's cooking."

"Thought you were mad at me, Hannah." He tried to keep his voice solemn, but laughter bubbled in his chest.

"Oh, you did not. You knew better than that." She tossed her head impatiently. "Fine thing if two neighbors can't have a friendly argument without outsiders butting in. Stella Jackson indeed!"

"I don't know, Hannah. I just don't know." He scowled at his left shoe. "Don't know if I should or not. This week you invite me to dinner, next week you'll be mad about something and try and have the law on me. Its downright unsettling to a man."

Hannah spluttered angrily, her face purpling.

When she spoke her voice was soft, almost pleading. "Of course it's up to you, Josiah. I wish you would come, though. I get so lonesome all by myself." She sighed deeply, watching from the corners of her eyes, to see how he would take it.

Josiah considered. No use pushing her too far, she'd just blow up again. Real mild now, especially for her. If she stayed this way, after dinner might be a good time to pop the question. At least he'd shown her once and for all who was boss.

"I'll come Hannah. I'll try it once more. No sense people being lonesome when they don't have to be."

"That's how I feel, Josiah," she said enthusiastically, "That's exactly how I feel."

She turned and bustled into the house and Josiah could hear the energetic rattle of pans as she started to work. He walked slowly back across the yard, humming "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," in a triumphant rumble.

He went into the house and began hunting for a clean shirt and his bottle of shoe blacking.

Stopping for a moment he cocked his head at the ceiling and said mildly, "I got things all fixed up, Lord. You don't have to fuss about it any more. But Lord, it would sure save me a heap of trouble if you kept Stella from finding out all that stuff I told Hannah."

He thought about it for a moment, then added, "More'n likely true though. Sounds just exactly like what she'd do."

He began hunting for his shirt again, trying vainly to remember — "Does Hannah own three or four farms?"

— Robert Harvey, F.O. Jr.